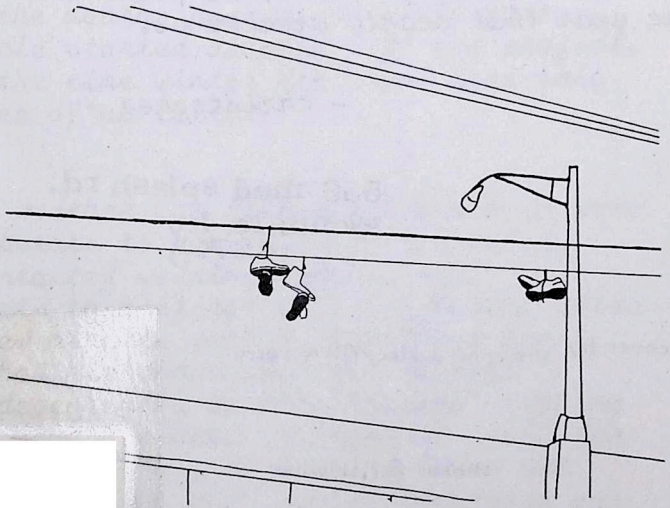
Country Mouse #2



we wanted the perfect house. one big enough and cheap enough to make all of our half-thought-out plans come together. after looking for 9 months, we were running out of momentum and couches to sleep on in louisville. this is the story of what we found and the year that nearly wrecked us.

- christopher -

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things weren't going so well. back in the spring there had been ten of us looking for a house together. we made polite phone calls to numbers on 'for rent' signs, gave convincing fake references, and covered our tattoos when we met with landlords. we did everything we were supposed to, and still no one would rent to us.

as the months passed, more and more people started dropping off the project. by the time winter hit there were only three of us left.

the weather was getting cold and we were desperate to make a good impression. we started wearing scarves and berets to meetings with landlords. after a few minutes with a storefront owner we had him convinced that we were 'independently wealthy artists' looking for studio space. he kept in touch for a few weeks but eventually found out we were broke and stopped returning our calls.

none of it made any sense. we were willing to pay a stranger piles of money to sleep in their building and no one would go for it. i was ready to fill up my pack and skip town when a crumbling mansion on brook street came looking for us.

our friend mike made a meager living reselling stolen books. he would work the suburban chainstores, filling up a messenger bag and walking out the side door. one day he noticed a tall man in a suit trailing him through the store. mike got creeped out and headed to the back asile to ditch the stuff in his bag. he got cornered in the travel section.

the man in the suit started asking mike a bunch of questions about what he was doing. they talked nervously for a few minutes before the guy stammered "you know i really don't do things like this but..." and asked mike out on a date! the whole time mike though he was the store cop fucking with him. mike left with the guy's business card, it said he was a property manager- a fake landlord.

when the rest of us heardt the story we knew this was our chance. figuring if the dude was sketchy enough to hit on a shoplifting punk, he'd probably rent to the likes of us.

after an awkward phone call and lies of various sizes, the property manager agreed to meet us at the cheapest house he had. he showed up late with no keys so we waited on the front porch while he broke into the second floor with a ladder.

the old tenents had left town insead of paying the last few months rent. the inside was full of their drug paraphernalia and DJ equipment. two nervous kittens poked around through the rubble. the property manager said since

the place was such a wreck he'd let us rent it for half of what he originally asked for. best of all, we didn't have to sign a lease, it'd all be under the table.

when it came time to move in the only ones that showed up were me, jamie, and cory.

JAMIE

i first met jamie years earlier at an eviction party for an old house of mine. he didn't have anywhere to live either, so the next day we ~~skipped~~ town together. we ended up bumming around as a package deal for months. jamie and i became best friends by consequence.

as a teenager he found ~~g~~his identity through radical youth projects like brat magazine and the original BRYCC house. bad blood in the scene, and a semester at a hippie college left jamie with more bitterness than any twenty three year old should have.

after we moved in together he started getting more unpredictable. jamie would have fits of rage that reminded me of the time i saw a friend have a seizure. all we could do was hold him down and wait for it to stop.

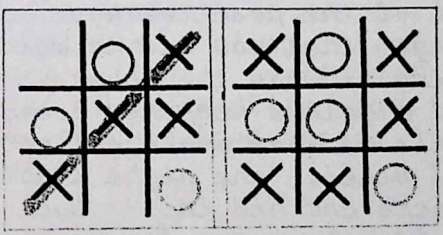
CORY

cory was scrawny and pretty. he looked a lot like iggy popp and even had the same last name. he had been in one of those probably-changed-your-life hardcore bands and was on tour most of the time.

he was always ready to try anything. at twenty-two he had nearly died so many times that he wasn't afraid of much anymore. his reckless enthusiasm was a catalyst for most of our bad ideas. it filled the gap between my inexperience and jamie's anger. whenever the rest of us couldn't relate, cory was there to make us get along. he was the dollar store thread that held all of us together.

tic tac toe

exposed beams divided the living room ceiling into 9 even squares. one of us said it'd be perfect to play tic tac toe on. later that day i came home to cory asleep next to a bucket of paint and a ceiling covered in X's and O's. from then on the house was always called "tic tac toe".



If two skilled players play tick-tack-toe, the game usually ends as a tie (*right*) instead of with a winner (*left*).

OLD LOUISVILLE

our part of town had easy access to dumpsters and kick-downs, a zine library, and parties in dilapidated old mansions. most of the punks anf older radicals lived in a five block radius.

all of the positive hype made it easy to forget that you had to watch your step going between the houses. violent crime and muggings happened every few days. girls we knew would get mobbed and yanked off bikes. one night i got chased for blocks and hid in back yard til i could make a run for my house. a friend of mine one block over got beaten and robbed in front of his infant son.

about every two months there'd be a murder in old louisville. years later on a basement floor in seattle, jamie and i did the math. we could remember at least 7 murders on our block in just over a year.

the first time i ever saw a dead body was in the ally behind tic tac toe. it was on of our neighbors. he laid there for hours while the police wandered around taking pictures. the body was face-down on bumpy cobblestones so the cops used orange spraypaint, not chalk, to outline the body. the paint lasted for months.

after parties we'd sit on the back roof trying to hit the dumpster across the alley with empty bottles. i always tried to miss the orange outline. mostly out of respect, but out of superstition too. the last thing the neighborhood needed was an angry ghost.

tic tac toe was right next to an interstate 65 overpass. no plants would grow on our block because of the toxic run-off from the highway. no plants meant no roots to hold the topsoil in place, so the neighborhood was always paved with dirt. the constant flow of travelers from the highways and trainyards kept our floors blackend with the grime of brook street.

the street had it's own dirt-weather patterns. dry spells meant clouds of dust and crunchy grit between your teeth. rain caused the sidewalks to disappear under streams of flowing mud.

FULL STACKS and DOUBLE BASS

with an amazing lack of foresight, the landlord said that we could "do our music thing" in the attic. we had band practices constantly and never got any complaints. the only time it ever came up was when a hillbilly neighbor would stand outside and yell "sounds fuckin' tough!" between songs.

despite our big plans we only pulled off one show in the tic tac toe attic, and it was almost a disaster. when too many people stood in one place the floorboards would sag and start splintering..cory spent the night anxiously pacing the room keeping people separated like a chaperone at junior prom.

BILLY SHOES

after ten months in the house, the living situation was starting to taste stale. shoes was a welcome change. he was a lovable scumbag from st. louis that showed up in town every few months. tess

a broken heart and a year on the road had changed billy shoes from a relatively clean anarchist kid, to a perma-crust train dude. even more surprising than that, he was looking for a place to live in louisville.

was he charmed by our frozen city and sluggish punk scene? nah, he fell for gretta, one of the steady members of a chaotic all-girl punkhouse down the street.

she attracted lovers from all over and dumped them as soon as they moved to town. she was like a siren from greek mythology. instead of sailors crashing into cliffs, the story always ended with broken-hearted punks crashing on my couch.

billy was no exception. after a month on the couch, we offered him the attic for a couple bucks a month. by november he had turned a corner of attic into an indoor shanty that incorporated the attic's slanted ~~xxxx~~ roof.

INCUBATOR

after a few months of attic camping billy started sleeping on the couches downstairs to protest our strict 'no heat all winter' policy, he brought a space heater into the house and set it up in the living room.

he covered all the windows with blankets and renamed our living room 'the incubator'. one by one the permanent residents of tic tac toe started sleeping in one room warmed by a single space heater.

in a house so big we didn't know what to do with it all, we were sleeping together on the fllor like a pile of puppies. it was cozy and familiar, and for those two months, it was home.

DECLINE

'y the second winter in tic tac toe we
ıll knew that the house wasn't last.
ve'd been living together for a year
ınd none of us were where we wanted to
ıe.

hoes and gretta didn't last long and
e was already making plans to leave.
amie drank days away, hung up on
ostalgia for three years ago. he spent
ost of his time with boxes of sad
ecords and old photographs. after five
ears of touring and hype, cory's band
inally broke up. he didn't leave his
ɔom for a week.

ɾile everyone else was off dealing with
ɾeir own problems i was slipping into a
ɔpey post-teenage depression. i would
ɾce the halls with a blanket on my
houlders mumbling ADOLESCENTS lyrics to
yself.

sobriety amongst the roommates was becoming a rare occurence as the 'rage party' attitude took over.

collective living turned into surly cohabitation as the four of us drifted in different directions. i think we had depended on each other for so much that when one of us started to fall apart, we all colapsed together.

we took our disappointment out on ourselves and each other, but mostly we took it out on the house.

needless to say, things got weird really fast.

LUDDITES

since the house was rented without a lease, people would live in it until they couldn't pay next month's rent and then split. all the stuff they didn't take ended up in piles on the floor of the attic.

i always saw it as sort of a museum. you could almost piece together a story from what the old tenants left behind. high school yearbooks, uniforms from fast food resturants, photographs of confused teenagers holding babies, letters home from prison.

the slanted walls were lined with boxes of junk and enough broken appliances to fill an electronics store. jamie and billy sorted through boxes of ~~clo~~the clothes and kept only the most outlandish. it didn't take long before the four of us stripped down to nothing

and started trying on gaudy dresses in the freezing cold. the dimly lit room was a blur of pink and yellow pastels. snug hotpants and hairy forearms sticking out of go-go dresses we looked like skinny lumber jacks in drag.

i was high on a mixed-up gender rush, everyone else was drunk on pabst. i remember standing on top of a dusty TV and shouting...

"destroy the machines! smash everything invented after 1850!"

being the only sober person in a room full of drunks doesn't necessarily make you a voice of reason.

TV screens were kicked in and air conditioners got smashed with a piece of an old bed frame. channel knobs and mangled electronics were scattered across the floor. someone found a working strobe light in one of the boxes and plugged it in. it was smashed within seconds.

MICE

food not bombs was cooked in our kitchen every sunday until the city closed down lampton park. we tried serving at other places but didn't seem to be getting food to people who needed it. so food not bombs went on an indefinate hiatus until we figured out what to do. instead of eating or distributing our supply of bulk food, it was crammed into a bottom cupboard and forgotten.

it wasn't until midwinter that the mice started sneaking around the kitchen at night. at first they were polite and kept it to themselves. the ones that were easy to recognize got nicknames like lightning bolt, huggybear, and breadsnatcher. our house was already full of uninvited roaches, squirrels, and cats, so we weren't gonna make a big deal about the new arrivals.

apparently they saw our lenience as weakness and invited all the neighborhood mice to move in too. they started getting brave. mice would run across the counters in the middle of the day. any food left out for more than a few minutes reappeared on the other side of the room covered in gnaw marks. the bowls and buckets full of standing water from the leaky room quickly filled with the bloated corpses of drowned mice. their poop was everywhere. we started getting worried.

every dish and kitchen surface was washed and rewashed at cory's insistance. there was nothing the mice wouldn't eat or at least poop in. all of our food was sealed in plastic containers and moved to the top shelf of the pantry.

Though it looks harmless, the mouse can be of the most destructive of nature's creatures.

inevitably one of us opened the bottom cabinet and found the mouse central command, the food not bombs stockpile. they nested in bags of instant mashed potatos and swam in a nibbled-open sack of white rice. all of it was ~~in~~ ruined. we chased them out as best we could with brooms and kicks.

more than a hundred pounds of useable food had to be thrown away. we carried it out to the trash heap in the alley, breathing in huge clouds of dust and mouse hair in the process. the next day we all woke up sick and wheezing, stricken with a mysterious illness that came to be known as the "tic tac toe mouseflu".

unfortunately, none of it stopped the mice, it just pushed them into different parts of the house. we could hear them chattering in the living room couches, and found their poop : in our bedrooms.

without their pile of food the mice became ravenous. they started eating scraps of plastic and snotty tissues from the trash. months later it was still impossible to keep food anywhere in the house.

it was time to outsmart the mice.

i remembered reading that people who live in the woods as a lifestyle usually set up a system of pulleys to keep food in the trees so bears won't bother their camps. figuring that idea could be applied to living in an infested building, i started putting food in backpacks and hung them from nails in the walls. it sorta worked. the mice kept chomping on plastic and tissues, but never found a way around my bear-proof system.

in the end, the mice outfought and out lasted us clumsy humans. they still controled the house when we left. just like the boxes of momentos in the attic, our mice stayed behind to welcome the next ill-fated tenants of tic tac toe.

DESCANSADO

roadside
memorial

in the end our sad comedy go to be too much for all of us. tic tac toe disbanded on the last day of january, just over a year after we moved in. it only took one night to clean out the entire house. we erased the scars of our recklessness with paintbrushes and brooms. the X's and O's, the machete marks on the walls from one of

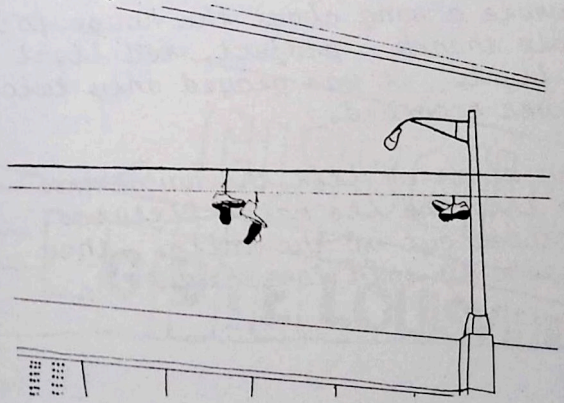
jamie's nihilistic rages, all of it disappeared under a thin facade of white paint.

the remnants of the luddite festival were relayed down the back stairs, through the alley, and into an abandoned house on the next block.

right before the sun rose, we tied the laces together on pairs of worn-out shoes and took turns tossing them over the powerline in front of the house. for whatever reason it was a meaningful gesture to me, like i had picked up on a big city custom that i only half-way understood.

it was the last thing we all did together, the final chapter of tic tac toe.

the red low tops i'd worn for years were left dangling above the sidewalk, my throw-up tag of canvas and rubber. they were a blur of color barely visible from the roaring highway. a roadside memorial to a dilapidated house and the hopeful kids that just couldn't keep it together.



EPILOUGE

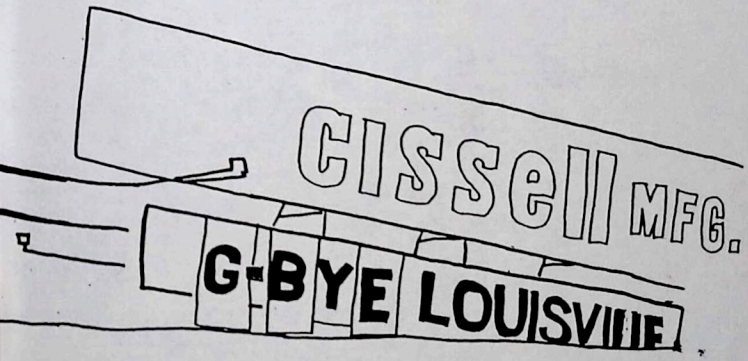
with that we scattered. shoes went to texas to work construction and eventually ended up back in st. louis squatting a shed. cory got a 'real job' as some sort of youth counseler and bought a house. i hit the road again and traveled the country on bikes, backseats, and grainer porches. jamie became a bartender and moved to seattle.

cory wrote a song about the house for his solo thrash project, red light green light. it was played only twice and never recorded.

the day after we left, the house was broken into and its metal fixtures were ripped out of the walls. they were probably sold for scrap.

a neighbor told me that a member of his union rents the house now. he's on parole for murder.
my old neighbor is afraid to play his music loud.

one last kick in the teeth, the house itself is now imortalized in the 2005 major motion picture "elizabethtown". twenty three minutes and fourteen seconds into the film, the main character gets lost and drives right past tic tac toe. it's the third house from the right. the one with the rusty tin roof.



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